Backgrounder

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The Politics of Labor Scarcity

Expediency and the Birth of the Agricultural "Guestworkers" Program

By Cindy Hahamovitch

American policy makers are currently debating whether the agricultural "guestworker" or H-2A program should be reformed to make it easier for growers to hire farmworkers from abroad. Critics of such a proposal fear that a vastly expanded program would create even more opportunities for abuses of power than the current violation-ridden program. Such a program, they argue, would constitute a return to the dark days of the bracero program, which brought nearly half a million Mexicans to perform backbreaking labor for low wages on western farms in the two decades after World War II. Proponents of a new guestworker scheme counter that the current program is too heavily regulated and that the proposed program would offer a legal alternative to the widespread use of undocumented farm labor.

While policy makers disagree as to whether agricultural employers face a labor feast or famine, few question whether the program was necessary at its start. Even the H-2 program's harshest critics presume that its creators were merely responding to a dearth of labor brought about by the wartime economy. Yet a look at the World War II-origins of the "Emergency Farm Labor Importation Program," the scheme that led to the H-2 program in the East and the bracero program in the West, reveals that the officials who created the guestworker program never believed that there was a national labor shortage in agriculture. They created the importation program, not because it was necessary, but because it was politically expedient to do so, because the nation's most powerful growers were demanding the preservation of the cheap, plentiful, and complacent labor force to which they had become accustomed over the previous 20 years of agricultural depression.

When war broke out in Europe in 1939, the American agricultural economy had been in a deep depression for 20 years and the New Deal had only made matters worse for rural laborers. New Deal crop reduction programs — which paid growers to plant less — led landlords to evict sharecroppers rather than share federal subsidies with them. Other New Deal programs simply ignored agricultural laborers altogether: The Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the National Labor Relations Act, the Social Security Act, and the Fair Labor Standards Act all denied coverage to agricultural laborers. This meant that some 65 percent of African Americans and large numbers of rural Anglo and Mexican Americans got no new deal at all. As a result, by the end of the 1930s, farmworkers were more likely to be poor, homeless, and marginally employed than ever before.

The only federal reform that helped farmworkers at all was the Farm Security Administration's (FSA) Migratory Camp Program, which offered them shelter, showers, daycare centers, and health clinics in permanent and mobile camps. By 1936, 26 permanent camps that could shelter 7,000 families were in operation or under construction on the Pacific Coast. The goal of the program was to keep farmworkers from starving and to encourage them to leave the migrant life altogether. Though the camps were made famous by John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (readers may recall the dance at the FSA camp toward the end of the novel), this federal reform barely made a dent in the surface of migrant poverty. Farmworkers were so poor and so plentiful as a result of the depression that California and Florida both set up border patrols to keep indigent workers from other states from crossing their borders.

The outbreak of war in Europe and the rise of a booming war economy in the United States had little impact on the farm labor glut. Two years after the

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start of the war, the Department of Agriculture was still lamenting the "superabundance of labor power on American farms." In early 1941, the Bureau of Agricultural Economics estimated that, if the United States entered the war, more than a million and a half farm workers could leave agriculture without impairing the nation's agriculture production. Indeed, the revival of the agricultural economy only exacerbated the problem of rural unemployment because cotton planters used their war profits to buy cotton-harvesting machines. Many displaced sharecroppers and day laborers enlisted in the armed forces or migrated to cities in search of war work, but thousands of others swelled the ranks of the nation's three migrant streams. [1]

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Though federal officials continued to insist that there was no farm labor problem that couldn't be fixed, rumors of farm labor scarcity began to circulate a few months after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Triggered perhaps by federal demands for increased agricultural production or by news that the Migratory Camp Program might lose its funding, rumors of farm labor shortages spread like weeds. Growers in Florida and California, whose large-scale farms were most dependent on migrant labor, led the chorus of complaints. Citing rising wages as an indication that the labor supply was dwindling, members of the American Farm Bureau Federation and California's Associated Farmers bombarded Washington with letters threatening to cut back production if they were not guaranteed a harvest labor supply the following season.[2]

Federal officials remained skeptical of these claims of labor scarcity, pointing out that farm wages needed to rise and that farmers who wanted labor needed to provide safe housing, clean water, and other basic amenities. Officials of the Departments of Labor and Agriculture were also struck by the fact that farm wages were lowest where growers complained the loudest. If labor prices could be taken as a measure of farm labor supply, they would have expected growers in the Northeast, who paid farm wages averaging 31 cents an hour in 1941, to complain the most about labor scarcity. Instead, the majority of complaints came from farmers in the lower south who were paying only 12 cents an hour. The problem was, of course, that the notion of a labor market that operated according to the law of supply and demand ignored the impact of custom and culture, of deeply held assumptions about what labor is "worth." Farmers, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Labor's Inter-Bureau Coordinating Committee concluded, were accustomed to "a great over-supply of workers." Some had "come to consider this oversupply as the normal supply, and to consider any reduction in the surplus supply as a shortage...." Over the past year (1941), the committee found, "there was some confusion in the use of the term `shortage,'" and a tendency in some cases "to identify increases in wages, irrespective of the number of workers available, as a shortage."[3]

According to federal officials, then, there was no real dearth of labor. Still, from their perspective, imagined labor scarcity was just as bad because growers who anticipated harvest labor shortages would plant less even though the war economy demanded that they plan more. If this occurred on a wide scale, as agricultural officials feared in the winter of 1941-42, the nation would fall short of its war production goals. Thus federal officials had to figure out not only where there might be "real labor shortages" and meet the demand, they also had to assure all farmers that the federal government was prepared to deal with any nationwide labor shortage. They had to create a labor supply program adequate to meet the real and *imagined* labor needs of the nation's farmers.

Officials of the Departments of Agriculture and Labor tried to assure farmers that all labor needs could be met if growers paid a reasonable wage. Moreover, any pockets of labor scarcity created by the draft or by proximity to war industries would be redressed by a joint effort of the Farm Security Administration and the U.S. Employment Service (USES). The FSA quickly expanded the Migratory Camp Program to demonstrate to farmers and to its congressional adversaries that it could meet the labor needs of truck farmers on both coasts. Thus, they transformed a program created to channel farmworkers out of the migrant stream into a program designed to facilitate migrancy. By July 1942, the FSA was operating 89 camps around the country, 43 of which were mobile camps that moved with the migrants. Six additional mobile units were already under construction, and 140 additional sites had been proposed.

The sheer magnitude of the federal labor supply effort was, indeed, remarkable. In 1942, for instance, the USES reported that the Eastern Shore of Virginia needed 900 workers for its fruit, vegetable, and berry harvests. The FSA quickly readied mobile camps in preparation for what it called "Migrant Soldiers on the Food

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Production Front." The USES then located workers in Florida who had been rendered superfluous by a flood. For every county and every crop, the USES had to know when labor needs would peak and when they would wane, how many workers would be required, and how many could be spared. Once workers were readied for relocation by the USES, the FSA had to move them, house them, and feed them, baby-sit their children, and tend to their illnesses, all while it continued to move other workers to other locations. It was an operation that rivaled troop movements and battle maneuvers in scale and complexity.[4]

Many small farmers were relieved to have federal officials assume the role of crew leader for they were most at risk if gas or tire rationing immobilized farmworkers. When the FSA asked for "good testimonial stories which show the need of our migrant camps," many small farmers were only too happy to oblige. For example, T.B. Griggs of Currituck County, North Carolina, wrote that "The camps were very satisfactory," adding that he "don't hardly know what we would have done...without them." During the potato digging season, the "U.S. Employment man" came by almost daily "to see if we had the labor we needed."[5]

Large farmers and farmers in regions deemed areas of labor surplus — especially those in Missouri, Tennessee, and Florida — were not so complacent. When FSA officials arrived to remove farm workers from these areas, growers' reactions ranged from outrage to armed resistance. For example, the governor of South Carolina threatened to arrest any federal agent recruiting labor in his state, and when the USES recruited several hundred farm workers in South Florida for work at Campbell Soup in New Jersey, Florida growers were outraged, calling it the "most high-handed act of labor piracy ever perpetrated in this state."[6]

Even when nearby labor camps were well supplied with labor, large growers complained about the increasingly militant farmworkers who resided in them. These workers were doing something that growers had rarely seen in 20 years: They were refusing work at depression-level pay. The fact that most American farmworkers were people of color — African Americans on the East Coast and Mexican Americans in the West — made their militancy especially outrageous to white farmers. Unlike farmworkers who lived in private labor camps, moreover, those in federal camps were particularly well placed to bargain with employers because they could not be evicted nor cut off relief for refusing work. The camps gave them security and growers' fears of labor scarcity gave them leverage. The Vienna, Maryland, camp manager reported, for example, that they "had a few incidents where farmers promised to pay them one rate and paid another — always lower. These farmers were never able to get any of the campers to work for them again." Likewise, the manager of the Everglades Farm Labor Supply Center noted that, due to the drop in the piece rate for beans, the bulk of their 872 campers refused to go to work.[7]

The language of growers' own complaints reveal that their problem was not so much the absence of labor but the presence of workers prepared to reject work at low wages. "There is not a shortage of farm labor," one Homestead, Florida farmer insisted, "They just wont stay on the job long enough to do any work....." Another complained in a telegram: "I have not struck nor sat down[.] my labor ha[s] several times...."[8]

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In the Jim Crow South of the 1940s, however, some growers would sooner plow over their crops than negotiate with a black or Mexican American field hand, and some went so far as to turn plowshares into swords. For example, the sheriffs of Lake County and Broward County, Florida used their official powers and their weapons to generate labor for themselves and their neighbors' farms. Sheriff Willis McCall of Lake County, Florida would have his officers sweep through black neighborhoods, arresting whomever they found out and about. (They only drew the attention of the Justice Department when they charged some 60 gainfully employed longshoremen with vagrancy and sentenced them to work off their fines on McCall's farm).

Given this climate, Farm Security Administration officials came under continuous fire, despite their willingness to reconstitute the FSA as a sort of federal crew leader. So, while the agency faced fiscal dismemberment on the floor of Congress, Secretary of Agriculture Claude Wickard left quietly for Mexico City to initiate negotiations with the Mexican government on the importation of Mexican farm workers. Evidently, FSA officials concluded that it would be easier to supply growers with labor from a foreign source than it was to cajole them into doing what was necessary to attract local la-

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bor. The Mexican government agreed to let the United States transport Mexican citizens to the United States for work on American farms and, in return, the Farm Security Administration got a six-month lease on life.

Transportation of domestic and foreign farm workers began in the fall of 1942. By February 1943, 4,000 Mexicans had been transported to harvests in California and Arizona and 6,808 American workers had been moved to various points around the country. Growers welcomed the former activity; the latter got Employment Service officials thrown in jail for violating anti-enticement laws or run out of town on a rail.

Caribbean and Mexican workers were not more attractive because they were cheaper than domestic workers, but because they could be promptly "repatriated" and replaced.

Aware that the federal government was supplying West Coast growers with Mexicans, East Coast producers demanded access to foreign workers as well. The offer was not long in coming. In April of 1943, Congress passed Public Law 45, a remarkable piece of legislation. It allowed for the expansion of the farm labor supply program, so long as federal funds were *not* used to improve the wages or conditions of *American* farmworkers. It froze American farmworkers where they were, allowing them to take a job on a farm elsewhere only if their local county agricultural extension agent said they could. And it reserved the federal migrant labor camps for foreign workers. Men and women from the Bahamas began departing for Florida almost immediately, and negotiations soon began to extend the migration program to Jamaican men.[9]

The expansion of the Labor Importation Program and the construction of legal barriers to domestic migration did not eliminate the American-born migrant worker from the agricultural labor force, but it dramatically undermined domestic workers' ability to bargain up their wages. On the East Coast, for example, African American migrants continued to move about on their own steam, although they ran up against wartime gas and tire shortages at every turn. Wherever they went, however, they found themselves in competition with foreign workers, both for work and for spaces in the newly renamed "Farm Labor Supply Centers." Bahamians arrived at the Okeechobee Camp in 1943, although the camp's staff thought that the domestic labor supply had been adequate the previous year. "[T]he farmer had more than necessary labor" in 1942, one staff member noted. With the addition of the Bahamians "many farm laborers were without day work," she added. In 1944, the Camp was "filled to capacity" by the time the bean harvest got under way. The camp manager noted in his monthly report for October that "Daily we turn down hundreds of applicants who are so anxious to call this their home." Competition led to a marked decline in the militancy of domestic workers by the end of the war. One Farm Labor Supply official noted in 1945 that "the Domestic colored did a swell job in harvesting the vegetable crop. They never once asked for higher prices than prevailed in that area."[10]

Caribbean and Mexican workers were not more attractive because they were cheaper than domestic workers. Growers who hired them had to pay a minimum wage, provide housing, pay their way home, guarantee three-quarters of their wages if work was unavailable, and pay the government a non-refundable fee per worker. Only the largest growers or growers cooperatives could afford foreign workers under this system. The attraction lay in the fact that, unlike domestic workers, the importees could be promptly and unceremoniously "repatriated" and replaced. The Pahokee, Florida, Labor Camp manager reported, for example, that "approximately 75 workers held a strike against the 50 cents an hour paid them which was the prevailing wage at that time. This strike was caused by three workers only and a hearing was held for the three workers involved and they were turned over to the Border Patrol for deportation...." He noted that "no other trouble has occurred since." Likewise, in Hebron, Maryland, in 1944, Caribbean workers protested wages that were lower than in other areas they had worked. "Many of the Bahamians have refused to work at these rates," the camp manager reported. "In many cases the workers wanted to pick their own jobs and dictate to the farmer the wage rate they wanted to get." He noted that they had had "quite a number" of workers repatriated due to complaints about living conditions, wage rates, food debts, and other matters. In Palmetto, Florida, Caribbean workers also "refused to accept employment" at the proffered wages. As a result, it had been "necessary to make some repatriations."[11]

While Caribbean workers chafed under the program's restrictions, African American observers couldn't help noticing that the importees were enjoying benefits that domestic farmworkers never even imagined. "Fair Wages Should Begin at Home," began an editorial in Norfolk, Virginia's, African American owned paper, the *Journal and Guide*. The author noted that West Indian laborers had been guaranteed a minimum wage of 40

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cents per hour and adequate housing, "which is much more than any U.S. Negro farm laborers are assured of making." "A minimum wage has been denied Negro or white farm labor in the United States," the author continued, "Its a long story, the retelling of which need not be undertaken here. But the experiment points up what the farmers can do, and what our government can do when necessity demands that something be done."[12]

The history of the Labor Importation program did indeed demonstrate what government could do either to facilitate or undermine farmworkers' efforts to improve their condition. It did not demonstrate that the transformation of the federal government into a sort of crew leader to a nation had ever been driven by necessity. Federal officials created the Emergency Farm Labor Importation Program, not because they believed it was necessary, but because they believed it was expedient.

The Importation Program was certainly more palatable to growers than the effort to relocate domestic farmworkers from areas of surplus to areas of scarcity, but it undermined farmworkers' efforts to lift themselves out of poverty. Farmworkers who struggled to bargain up their wages after 20 years of agricultural depression found themselves thrown into competition with farmworkers from abroad who could be deported for making the very same demands. But with workers from other Caribbean nations clamoring to work in the United States as well, American growers had little incentive to improve conditions. Those who did not like them could simply leave. In the last year of the war, 38,000 Jamaicans, Barbadians, St. Lucians, and British Hondurans labored in the United States alongside almost 62,000 Mexicans, 5,800 Bahamians, 120,000 POWs, and an undisclosed number of Puerto Ricans (who were only reluctantly included in the program because, as citizens, they could not be deported for striking).

The end of the war came and went with little change in the "Emergency" Farm Labor Importation Program. Congress moved quickly to expel foreign war workers from industrial jobs, but the agricultural program received an extension and then another and another.[13] What began in 1942 as an expediency became, in the aftermath of the war, a fixture of modern American agriculture.

End Notes

[1] Daily farm wages actually fell in the six months after the German invasion of Poland. On the persistence of agricultural labor surplus, see Wayne D. Rasmussen, *A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, 1943-47*, Agricultural Monograph No. 13, U.S. Department of Agriculture Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Washington, D.C. 1951; *Yearbook of Agriculture*, 1940, p. 908; N. Gregory Silvermaster, director, Labor Division, FSA, to Wayne N. Darrow, director, Agricultural Labor Administration, March 20, 1943, Office of Labor, FSA correspondence, box 75, file 4-FLT-R36, labor estimates, RG 224, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Office of Agricultural War Relations, general correspondence, 1939-1941, report no. 4, August 14, 1940, and report no. 9, September 18, 1940, box 6, file Admin.-progress reports, RG 16, NARA.

[2] Office for Agricultural War Relations, general correspondence, 1942, box 145, file Employment 3 wages (January 1-July 31), RG 16, NARA.

[3] The Agricultural Marketing Service concurred with the Interbureau Coordinating Committee in its conclusion that the farm labor supply was not seriously reduced. Its studies showed an increase in wages between 1940 and 1941, but no drop in the number of hired laborers in agriculture. According to the Marketing Service, average monthly wages with board were $37 in July of 1940 and $45 in 1941. Report of the Interbureau Planning Committee on Farm Labor, "Review of the Farm Labor Situation in 1941," 12/31/41, RG 16, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, No.17 General Correspondence of the Office of the Secretary, 1906-1970, Subject: Employment, File: "1. Labor Oct 4 to" [1941?].

[4] General correspondence, employment, 1-4 farm, and Office of Information press release, May 22, 1942, box 188, RG 16, NARA.

[5] See Correspondence concerning migratory labor camps, 1935-1943, box 1, and box 16, RG 96, NARA.

[6] See General correspondence, employment-1-labor, file 4/23-12/31/42, RG 16, NARA; correspondence concerning migratory labor camps, 1935-1943, box 7, file Migratory-120-A thru G, RG 96, NARA; general correspondence, 1943-44, box 61, file 6-R15-Florida, July-Dec. 1943, RG 224, NARA.

[7] See box 16, file RP-M-85-183 and RP-M-81-183, monthly reports, RG 96, NARA; box 51, file C2-R36, narrative reports FLSC, Florida, 1944, RG 224.

[8] Correspondence, 1943-1944, box 75, file 4-FLT-R57, RG 224, NARA.

[9] U.S. Congress, House Committee on Appropriations, 1943-44, *Hearings…Farm Labor Program*, cited in Rasmussen, p. 42; PRO, CO 318, 448/10, Recruitment of Labour for U.S.

[10] General correspondence, 1943-44, box 51, file C2-R36-Florida, RG 224, NARA.

[11] Ibid, boxes 52 and 78, RG 224, NARA.

[12] Norfolk *Journal and Guide*, July 17, 1943.

[13] The Norfolk *Journal and Guide* protested the continuation of the program, arguing that farm operators and the federal government were defeating any New Deal for agricultural workers by "continuing a war-inspired importation of foreign laborers when the conditions which made that imperative no longer exist." Protests such as this one were few, however, and they went unheeded. *Journal and Guide,* October 5, 1946.

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This *Backgrounder* looks at the World War II-origins of the "Emergency Farm Labor Importation Program," the scheme that led to the H-2 program in the East and the bracero program in the West, revealing that the officials who created the guestworker program never believed that there was a national labor shortage in agriculture. They created the importation program, not because it was necessary, but because it was politically expedient to do so, because the nation's most powerful growers were demanding the preservation of the cheap, plentiful, and complacent labor force to which they had become accustomed over the previous 20 years of agricultural depression.